

Q: Alright, good afternoon today is March 13, 2017. My name is Wendy Lee and I'm here at the Newton North High School with Alan Moy Sooho. Together we are participating in the Newton Talks Oral History Project that is being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton and the Newton Senior Center. And to start off, what is your sweetest childhood memory and how does that memory affect your life?

A: Well first let me say that I am Toisanese, and my father came to America when he was about 12 years old, he's 105 now. And he started out in Fall River, Massachusetts where the family had a restaurant. Mom was born in Chinatown, her father was a tea merchant, so her family was one of the first families in Chinatown. And they were married in 1947, 70 years ago, and lived in Fall River where I was born.

Now Fall River is an interesting place. It had a lot of textiles and at one point there was a lot of money in Fall River but by the 50's the textile mills had moved south. There was a lot of poverty in Fall River and at one point it had the highest unemployment rate in the country. So not a very prosperous place but I had a wonderful childhood, and key to that probably was the church. It was was the Central Congregational Church in Fall River. It wasn't the closest church to our home, it wasn't the closest Congregational Church to our home, and I never understood why we attended that church. And maybe about 10 years ago my sister told me we went to that church because it was the first church in Fall River to welcome Chinese. And so at church I had contact with other Chinese people. In the school I attended there were two Chinese people, myself and my sister. And that was throughout my elementary school in Fall River and so I didn't have a lot of contact with Chinese people other than at church. And it was a...church was a very nurturing, safe place and at one time I even thought I might want to be a minister. And so I will say that that growing up in Fall River, it was a working-class hardscrabble existence, but I had a great childhood, lots of friends. Most of them were Portuguese. Growing up I knew more Portuguese than Chinese. And I have no regrets for the kind of childhood I had. It was great. So that's what I can tell you about my childhood.

Q: Sounds good. What was it like when you first moved to Newton? Do you remember the first day?

A: October 14, 1960. I remember distinctly. The restaurant business went belly-up and so my father taught himself electronics and we moved. At the time there was a lot of defense contracting around 128, and so we move from Fall River and Dad wanted good schools. Newton had a reputation for excellent schools and so moved to Newton in 1960. Now my mother's sister and her family had lived in Newton about two blocks from the house where my parents bought their home. My aunt and uncle had left Newton about a year before, but they had lived in Newton throughout the Fifties. And so we would visit them frequently, and so I actually knew the neighborhood. I knew the school, I went to Franklin, sixth grade at the Franklin Elementary School. And so that I knew the neighborhood, I knew the school. And I remember October 14, 1960, I have a younger sister, so Mom was home with the baby, Dad took my sister to register her at Warren Junior High School, which is Warren House now on Washington Street. And so I just presented myself to the principal and said, "Here I am!" And months later, my sixth grade teacher at Franklin, Mrs. Ridlon, told my mother...she said "Ugh, another boy in the class..." And she told my mother what a great kid I was, she was so glad I was in the class, although she said she remembered thinking that one more kid in the class, she wasn't thrilled with the idea. But did say that it was a good experience for both of us. Now I should say that Fall River, as I told you, had relatively high unemployment. Some people would think that the school system may not have been as good as Newton's, and that was a perception in Fall River I remember. One of the teachers told me, he said that when you move to Newton you may find that you're behind, but he told me you'll catch up. He was wrong. We were advanced and I'm thinking "Oh I already know that stuff! This is what I've learned in Fall River." And so that I told you I had a great time growing up in Fall River and in no way did that experience hold me back. It enriched my life and so that transition to Franklin wasn't hard. There weren't any other

Chinese at Franklin, but there weren't any other Chinese in my previous elementary school, not a big deal. So that was how I made my entree into Newton.

Q: That's good. And have you faced any difficulties because your cultural inheritance, and if so can you give an example?

A: I'm of an age that being Chinese was exotic. And so people who weren't out and out hostile, who were trying to be friendly, would say "You speak such good English!" Well, English is my first language, I don't speak any Chinese to speak of, I have had ten years of French. But it was, it was always that you're an outsider, that oh, you couldn't really be...really proud of us because you're Chinese, so you must be foreign in some way. And that used to annoy me tremendously, when people would say "Oh, you speak such good English." And when I was a teenager and kind of snotty I would say, "And so do you!" Because I thought it was it was kind of a put down, "You speak such good English." So I would say, "Well so do you," and that would leave people kind of speechless. Well, what could they respond to that? But that was my sense.

Now when I went to college I wanted, for a while I thought I might be a sociology major. And my professor told me, she said, "You know, Alan, you're an outsider. And that can be a great benefit, because you can see things in ways that people inside a group may not be able to." One of my class-...I went to Lake Forest College, which was relatively small, about maybe 1100 students. And my freshman class had a little bit less than 400 students in the freshman class. One of my classmates, Chinese from Chinatown, told my sister decades later that one thing he always admired about me was the ease with which I seemed to be with white students. And my sister said, "He grew up in Newton! There weren't any Chinese." And so in Lake Forest College, of about 1200 students...in my class, there were a woman from Hawaii, a man from New York City...and so there were about maybe 3 to 5 Asian students per year. Some Japanese, some foreign students from Asia. And so it was a very small number of Asian students which all tended to congregate together. And so this classmate, did tell

my sister that he was amazed with the ease with which I...seeing the comfort level I had with Caucasian students. So I guess that comes from being...maybe growing up Chinese in Newton. So there are benefits I guess to being the outsider as my sociology professor told me.

Q: What were your hopes for yourself and/or your family when you first came here and have you realized those hopes?

A: Well, I graduated from Newton High School in 1967, fifty years ago. And I was...flabbergasted, maybe not, that's quite not the right word, but I was shocked that there were people in my class who weren't college-bound. I remember at four years old my father told me that I would go to college. I had assumed it was just a natural part of growing up, and I had assumed that everyone had that same expectation. And so that my parents were very focused on education. And I have two sisters, one is an attorney, one by training is an engineer, but she got an MBA and sells software. I was a math major and a pre-med. I went to medical school. I went to the University of Nebraska, College of Medicine, where family medicine was encouraged. But I wanted to come back East and so I was advised to become a general internist, because general, internal medicine, had greater respect than family medicine on the East Coast. So I was a medical intern at Yale and this is before there were limits on the amount of hours how staff could work. And so we were on every third night, but every third weekend, and on the weekend that meant we started at, Saturday at 8 a.m. We finished on Monday at 8 a.m., and then Monday's a regular day we work until 5:00 p.m. So my first weekend on call I thought "This is going to kill me, I'll never get through three years of this." And when I was in Nebraska I'd been interested in psychiatry. But now Nebraska was at the state school and so most of the people at Nebraska were from within the state and psychiatry was considered some, too highfalutin. And psychiatry wasn't highly regarded in my medical school. And so I abandoned that idea initially. Then I thought, I'm going to be psychiatrist, and so after a year of internal medicine--I did survive. I will say though that when I was a medical intern there was two chief residents. One was warm and supportive one was kind of cold and judgmental. The middle of the internship year the warm supportive

chief resident committed suicide. And I thought, “Oh did I make the right choice? ” And so I left and I was, I went to University of Pennsylvania. My psychiatry...and...I’m skipping back.

I came of age in the 60’s. I had friends, we’re all gonna change the world. And I had thought, “I want to be Secretary of Health, Health, Education, and Welfare.” That was the old department name. And so I thought, “I’m going to go to medical school, I’m going to go to business school, I’m going to Washington, and I’m going to write health care policy.” Well I -- I went to medical school, I completed a psychiatry residency, I went to the Wharton School, got an MBA in Healthcare Administration. And I thought, “I’ll never make it in Washington.” I just don’t have the fortitude to handle the politics. And so for 30 years, I worked for the Department of Veterans Affairs treating veterans. I am not a veteran myself, I have a lot of respect for veterans. And for the last half of my career I was Chief of Staff at the Battle Creek VA Medical Center in Michigan.

And so, were my parents’ objectives met? Yes. My father talks about his children, the doctor, the lawyer. My father gives legal advice, he gives medical advice. I said “Well gee, Dad.” He said “Look, I know these things!” I said “Sure, Dad.” And so that, I would say that my grandparents would believe that the struggles they made to come to America were fulfilled in the lives of their grandchildren. But my grandparents lived through the Depression. They lived through institutional racism. And, but the family has a position in America. And I think my grandparents would say, “Well done!”

Q: What was the most important and meaningful event or experience in your life, and what’s been the biggest challenge or success?

A: My biggest challenge perhaps was to be a fine physician. I was first, for the first half my career I was a clinical physician. I treated patients. For the last half I was an administrator. As Chief of Staff I was responsible for maybe three to four hundred people, for 40,000 veterans.

And and this is a relatively small VA. And I worked seven days a week. I would begin at 8:00 a.m. I would walk to 9 p.m. Go home get in bed by 10:00 p.m. Up by 6:00 a.m. Get ready, exercise, have breakfast, get into the office by 8:00 a.m. Work until 9 p.m., and repeat. I thought, "Oh this job's going to kill me." But it didn't. I retired after 30 years, and I've gone back to work part-time at the Boston VA seeing patients. And I was just chatting with my boss recently, and what he told me, it's very gratifying, he said "Alan, in my career I've known maybe a half-dozen doctors whom I knew were top-quality." He said "You're one of them." And I thanked him. I wasn't humble about it. I'm thinking, "It's true! I know I'm good." And let's not be...a lot of Chinese would say oh you shouldn't boast, and such and such, but when you're good you're good. And especially when you're Chief of Staff, you to have to have, do things people respect. You can't be humble, and so I thanked him. And I know that as a clinician I'm excellent. People tell me this all the time. And as an administrator, well, I worked my fanny off to do the best I could for veterans, and if I came up short, well it wasn't for lack of trying.

Q: Are there aspects of your culture or traditions that helped you make your immigration experience successful?

A: Well, Chinese are taught to be respectful. They're taught the value of education. And I would say it is those characteristics that have been useful in my professional and personal career. Way back when I was training, back in, so this is in the 70's. I'm in group therapy. There's staff, there are patients, and the group leader asks, "Tell me one thing that you like about yourself." Comes around to Alan. "I'm Chinese," is what I said. That being Chinese, it has, it's not all terrific. I mean, that it's education, education, education, oy! That, sometimes it's overbearing, but there is a culture, there's a tradition that's thousands of years old. China has a place in the world which commands respect. Chinese have a role in America which command respect. We can think of Elaine Chao is Cabinet Secretary. Governor Locke, Gary Locke was governor. And there are Chinese who have--Yo-Yo Ma--have made wonderful contributions. Ming Tsai. To affiliate with

these people, to affiliate with some of the best in the world. I'm proud to be Chinese. I'm proud to be American.

Q: All right, would you like to answer a few more questions?

A: Sure!

Q: Tell us, actually...Can you share a story about your experiences with Chinese and English? I guess since you said that your first language was English.

A: Well I was in France in 2014, first time I've been to Europe. And I wanted to try the Chinese food, just curious. And so I go to a Chinese restaurant and...now I have had 10 years of French. Last time I had a French class was 1968, so it's been a while. So my French is not that good, and so I'm speaking French with the waiter and it's quite apparent to him that I am not a native speaker. He does what comes naturally, he turns to me and speaks to me in Chinese! And I thought, "uh oh!" So I asked him, "Do-you-speak-Eng-lish?" No.... So I just pointed at things, and that's how I got my meal at the Chinese, the French-Chinese restaurant. And it is not like Chinese-American food at all. I should tell you I was married to a woman from Hong Kong. And I...when we first married I took her to a Chinese-American restaurant and I ordered food. And afterwards she asked me, "Was that a typical American meal?" I said, "That was a Chinese meal!" Now she grew up in Hong Kong, she said, "I never ate food like that my entire life." I said, "It was a typical Chinese-*American* meal."

And so...I did tell you that my family had a restaurant, and so I grew up eating Chinese-American food. In Fall River there is what's called a chow mein sandwich. It's a hamburger bun with chow mein on top and it's specific to Southeastern Massachusetts, because it was a cheap meal--you could get a chow mein sandwich for five cents during the Depression. And that's why there's the chow mein sandwiches in the area.

Now for a time I worked at the Brockton VA, and many of the staff were from Fall River and they knew that I had roots in Fall River. And one -- one of the staff told me that he had been all around the world and he said, "You know, you can't get a decent chow mein sandwich in Hong Kong! The best chow mein sandwiches are in Fall River!" I said, "Who would believe it?" I can't imagine going into Hong Kong saying, "I want a chow mein sandwich," they'd think "What in the world is a chow mein sandwich? What do these crazy Americans want." So that was some of my adventures in Chinese food.

Q: What advice would you give to someone moving here from your country?

A: I would say number one, learn English. Number two, Americans are friendly, generous people, but you have to meet them where they are. You can't expect to not make accommodations to the local culture. And try new things, meet people from different professions, from different socioeconomic classes, from different ethnicities. I have friends who are in some ways quite unlike myself. And that has enriched my life, it's given me a way to understand the world. And so I would advise people, don't be afraid to engage with Americans. They're friendly people, but they have their limitations and so you have to help explain and teach them about yourself. Many of them are very interested and want to know. And don't get snotty and if someone says, "Oh you speak such good English" just say thank you. Just say, "Oh thanks" is my advice.

Q: It looks like our time is just about up. What is one thing that you would like people 100 years from now to know about your time in the US?

A: America is a land of opportunity if you look for it in the right places. And that...my grandfather came at a time when there was a Chinese Exclusion Act. There was institutional racism. In my lifetime I was Chief of Staff at the VA Medical Center. Hard work, diligence,

education, will pay off. Persistence. Don't give up. Have hope for the future. And as best you can have a good time. Thanks so much.

Q: Thank you so much for taking time to do this with us. We're really happy to be able to include you in the Newton Talks Oral History project.

END OF INTERVIEW